

19 March 2020

Holiday break should be brought forward if schools can't manage COVID-19

The union representing non-government sector teachers and school support staff says an early school vacation will be essential in the face of inadequate and uncoordinated employer responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

Independent Education Union – Queensland and Northern Territory (IEUA-QNT) Branch Secretary Terry Burke said the time for employer action in schools is now to address real and significant health issues in schools.

“Schools are being placed in the frontline responding to COVID-19 without adequate resources, which is putting employees’ health at risk,” Mr Burke said.

Mr Burke said parents are already voting with their feet by keeping their children at home and a number of schools have already made the decision to finish the term early.

“Governments have been asking school staff to run schools on the basis of social distancing and handwashing alone,” Mr Burke said.

“Clearly, we’re now at a point where we need to consider stronger measures, including bringing forward the school holiday break.

Mr Burke said IEUA-QNT members did not object to being onsite at work but were concerned about the degree of exposure and contact with others.

“A teacher, due to the very nature of their work, will come into contact with hundreds of other people each day,” Mr Burke said.

“Clearly, provisions need to be made in schools for children of health workers to continue to attend – our members understand that.”

Mr Burke has also called for a summit (teleconference) meeting in the new week with school authorities to bring employers and the IEUA-QNT together to deal with the challenges ahead.

“We need a united front in the face of the COVID-19 challenge and clear leadership to manage it together,” Mr Burke said.

“Our members don’t understand why they should continue to face exposure to the contagion without stronger protective measures in place.

“Employees with compromised health conditions and those at an age where they are more vulnerable are especially concerned, and few employers are making provision for these workers.

“As the risk to school staff grows by the hour and by the day, governments and school authorities must act swiftly to protect the health of teachers and school support staff.

“Schools should not be the ‘second frontline’ in dealing with this health crisis.

“We need real protections, beyond distancing and handwashing, for our teachers and school support staff.

“The risk to the health of education workers is too great to continue as we are doing.”

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The Independent Education Union of Australia – Queensland and Northern Territory Branch represents more than 17,000 education professionals across Queensland and the Northern Territory. www.qieu.asn.au